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AUTHOR Selnow, Gary W.; Reynolds, Hal
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ABSTRACT

Interviews were conducted with 184 sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students to determine patterns of pastime activities that stand as alternatives to television viewing. In the first portion of the 35-minute interview, respondents were presented with a current daily television listing and asked to indicate which programs they normally watched. To collect data on alternative media consumption patterns, the interviewers probed the students' use of radio, records and tapes, newspapers and video games. Students were also asked about their membership in school, church, and other social clubs and groups and asked to furnish information about their hobbies, sleeping patterns, playing of musical instruments and other activities. Results indicated that as television viewing time increased, so did time spent listening to records and tapes, and to a smaller degree, listening to radio and engaging in hobby activities, as well as time spent playing video games in a video game parlor. However, as involvement with television increased, time spent sleeping and in group activities decreased. Finally, the interviews revealed that those who viewed more television engaged in active hobbies (sports) while those who viewed less television engaged in artistic or intellectual hobbies. (HOD)

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Gary W. Selnow
Hal Reynolds

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Some Opportunity Costs of Television Viewing

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Introduction

Every year national statistics demonstrate the capacity of American viewers to find in their daily schedules a few minutes more than they did during the previous year to spend with television.[1] Since the advent of television, audiences have consistently racheted upwards the proportion of time devoted to the medium, and if current thinking on the popularity of forthcoming audio-visual innovations holds true future usage trends will likely continue in this direction.[2] While the ongoing concern for direct effects of television viewing will continue to hold great importance in light of these anticipated exposure patterns, a companion issue of equal weight draws attention: as Robinson put it, "when more time is spent viewing, less time must be spent doing something else."[3]

Implications of this statement may be obscured by its apparent simplicity. For young viewers, the displacement effects of television, indeed, may be a critical issue. During the developmental years the richness of a youngster's learning milieu can be measured, in part, by the quality and variety of available sources of lessons. Consequently, there is reason for concern about conditions under which a youngster's repertoire of activities may contract due to displacement from a competing activity. Of particular interest here are the possible effects of opportunities lost when, due to increased television viewing, other activities become squeezed from the child's daily schedule. The potential for alternative activities to suffer from the dominance of television is

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well demonstrated by statistics which show that television viewing time for the average child is surpassed only by time spent in school and in sleep.[4]

With television consuming ever greater portions of an adolescent's waking day, are there, in fact, as Robinson holds, unavoidable sacrifices which must be made among other activities? Several researchers offer evidence that such a trade-off is not certain. Lyle and Hoffman report no significant relationship between television viewing time and the level of participation in social, recreational, hobby or work activities,[5] suggesting that generations of children reared with television may have learned to integrate large quantities of this medium into their schedules without finding it necessary to jettison other activities.

In an interpretation of findings which reveal a relatively high usage of television along with a high participation in other leisure activities, Meyersohn evokes a concept known as "the more, the more," which posits essentially that those motivations which drive an individual to view large amounts of television will similarly compel him/her to pursue other leisure activities.[6] In this view, television watching and alternative leisure activities are not in competition, but serve rather to reinforce one another -- an interest in one activity further stimulates interest in other activities.

Other findings stand in opposition to these. Long and Henderson conclude that television viewing and free play are negatively related to time spent on all other activities including sleeping.[7] In a review of relevant literature Comstock, et al. summarize that television has been shown to displace time spent in a variety of leisure, social and media activities.[8] Based on data collected from multi-national television use studies, Robinson concludes that television viewing affects both alternative media consumption practices and participation in leisure

time activites.[9]

For a ten year period beginning in 1948, one longitudinal study looking at first-time television set owners charted an initial abandonment of alternative leisure-time activities for television viewing, and then found a reversion to pre-television activity patterns but without a concomittant decrease in television viewing.[10] Here, researchers saw both displacement effects and an eventual recovery of alternative activities along with television viewing.

A scheme proposed by Robinson may help provide structure to the varied findings of previous research. In a review of a time use study conducted by the University of Michigan Survey Research Center in 1975, Robinson offers a workable and intuitively satisfying typology of activities categorized according to their compatibility with television viewing.[11] He explored the association of television viewing with alternative activities using correlational statistics which revealed the strength of the relationships. From his findings, the author suggests that a variety of activities performed in the home are complementary with television viewing (exemplifying "the more, the more" phenomenon), while many activities performed away from the home are competitive with television. He suggests that the home serves as a locus of activities including television viewing. He offers a third "in-between" category in which the competitive or complementary nature of the activity with television is not well established. Although not all activities considered by previous studies can be conveniently categorized according to this scheme, Robinson makes a logical distinction among his groupings and suggests that the formula for displacement effects is different for some categories of activities than others. With these distinctions in mind, the present study considers the relationship of television viewing with pastime activities of adolescents.

Methodology

In all, 184 students, from three school systems, in the 6th (n=31), 7th (n=99) and 8th (n=54) grades participated in face-to-face interviews which lasted approximately 35 minutes each. The sample consisted of 95 males and 89 females. Respondents from cooperating schools were included if they: 1) were enrolled in grades 6, 7 or 8, and 2) were given parental permission to partcipate. Although parental approval introduces the possibility of respondent preselection, school officials familiar with the student population observed that the sample appeared to display no evident bias.

Data for this study were drawn from questionnaires administered by trained interviewers. In the first portion of the interview responents were presented with a current daily television listing and asked to indicate which programs they normally watched. From this it became possible to chart not only how much television the child viewed, but specifically which shows and at what times students usually watched. While such an approach to gathering viewing data may be less desirable than viewing logs (which also suffer from methodological problems) viewing figures reported here were checked against national television usage data compiled by the A.C. Nielson Company during the same time period. An estimation for this age group, which was interpolated from Nielsen reporting categories (6-11 years and 12-17 years), reveals a daily national average of 3.7 viewing hours compared to 3.6 hours for respondents in this study. These Nielsen statistics lend confidence to the accuracy of total viewing figures gathered in the present study.

In addition to assessing total television viewing time, the in-person

interviews gathered information from respondents on a wide variety of alternative activities. For purposes of this analysis they have been clustered into three categories:

1. Alternative media consumption patterns. Here the interviewers probed students' use of radio, records and tapes, newspapers and video games (both in the home and at arcades).

2. Membership in groups and clubs. Students were asked about their membership in school, church and other social clubs and groups.

3. Miscellaneous pastimes. Respondents provided information about their hobbies, sleeping patterns, playing of musical instruments and general information about other activities.

Results

This study set out to explore, among middle school children, patterns of pastime activities which stand as alternatives to television viewing. While this work does not propose to extend Robinson's work to a sub-population, it borrows from his conceptual framework by comparing the amount of television viewing against participation in other activities and using his categorization scheme to describe the nature of the relationships between television viewing and these pastime alternatives. Time-spent data are collected for media, video games and sleeping variables, and dichotomous measures ("do you engage in or not engage in this activity") for group membership, playing of musical instruments and hobby items. Newspaper usage is measured as the number of sections of the paper usually read by the respondent. The analytic approach employes a correlational design; for dichotomous variables a point-biserial formula is employed. Table I displays the relationships between the total television viewing

variable and alternative media, social and other pastimes.

Table I about here

Media Alternatives. Of the three media considered here, only time spent listening to records and tapes appears to have a significant relationship with the television viewing variable. In light of this positive association, listening to records and tapes and watching television must be considered complementary activities. While listening to the radio is also positively related to television viewing, the relationship is so weak, according to Robinson's design, it must be categorized as an in-between activity. The association between the respondent's use of newspapers (measured by the number of sections of the paper generally read by the respondent), and total television viewing demonstrates a weak negative relationship, so use of this medium is also categorized as an in-between activity.

Robinson's findings for alternative media usage are generally supported here for radio and record/tape listening since these pastimes demonstrate a positive relationship with television viewing. Although newspaper reading does not confirm Robinson's observations, the negative relationship with television viewing is very weak. Furthermore, adolescents in this sample can be expected to differ in their reading habits from adults in Robinson's sample. Differences in patterns of media usage according to age have been well documented, and the present findings among this adolescent sample may be reflecting, in part, this characteristic of age.

Social Activities. Because Robinson's scheme holds such importance for the "at-home" and "away-from-home" distinction of alternative activities, this study explored separately the respondent's use of video games at home and in video arcade parlors. Results here suggest relationships in reverse of what might be expected from Robinson's observations. Where Robinson would likely predict that home video game playing is complementary with television viewing (have a positive relationship), these data reveal a weak, but negative relationship. Furthermore, Robinson's conclusions would suggest a competitive relationship between arcade video game playing (since it is an away-from-home activity) and television viewing, where these data indicate a complementary relationship.

Although reasons for this observed relationship are not disclosed by the present data, it appears those who view the greatest amount of television have eagerly adapted to the arcade parlor format of video game playing, not at the expense of viewing but as a complement to it. Curiously, while those heavier television users have demonstated a strong interest in playing arcade games, they tend not to be as enthusiastic about their home video game systems. Perhaps when it comes time for heavy viewers to decide between watching a television program and hooking up the video game, the game looses to the strong competition of the program. Those who view less television may be more likely to forgo the program for the game.

Of the alternative activities reviewed in this study, social group membership appears to have the strongest competitive relationship with television viewing. Among all respondents, there is a negative relationship between television viewing time and membership in school groups and church-sponsored organizations. Looking at only those respondents who play musical instruments, there appears to be a negative relationship between total television viewing time and participation in a

band or orchestra. In these instances Robinson's findings are reinforced: group memberships involve away-from-home activities and they are competitive with television viewing. Whether or not television directly displaces these activities is a question of causality which must go unanswered by these data. It cannot be determined that because a respondent invests such large amounts of time in television viewing he has little remaining time in which to join social groups. Certainly other explanations stand ready to describe the observed relationship. For instance, inherent non-joiners may fill time which otherwise might be spent in groups by watching television.

Other Activities. Three additional pastime activities of adolescents were explored according to their relationships with television viewing. First, there is an evident competitive relationship between playing of a musical instrument and the amount of time spent watching television. In other words, the greater exposure time to television, the less likely it was that a responent played a musical instrument. Another alternative to television viewing is sleeping, and here, too, there appears to be a competitive relationship. The greater amount of time spent viewing television, the less time these adolescent respondents spent sleeping. This finding lends support to the observations of Long and Henderson who similarly found an inverse relationship betweeen sleeping and television viewing. Controlling for respondent's age does not change the nature of this association ($r=-.13;p<.04$). While Robinson's observations of an adult sample suggest a complementary relationship between television viewing and sleeping, adolescents from this study demonstrate the opposite. It looks as though some room in the youngster's schedule may be cleared for television viewing through the sacrifice of sleep.

Finally, this study considered the television viewing variable in

terms of the respondent's involvement with hobbies. Here a very weak positive relationship was found, thus placing the hobby variable in the in-between category. Although there was no relationship between the extent of hobby involvement and television viewing, several follow-up questions revealed differences in the kinds of hobbies pursued by the heaviest and lightest television viewers. Those in the upper third of the viewing category tended to engage in active, physical hobbies such as sports, horseback riding and dancing, while respondents in the lower third were more likely to have passive, educational or artistic hobbies.

Table 2 about here

Discussion

There is modest support in these data for claims of "the more, the more" explanations proposed by Meyersohn and further described by Robinson. As television viewing time increases, so does time spent listening to records and tapes, and to a smaller degree, listening to radio and engaging in hobby activities. These are precisely the kinds of activities -- those accomplished in the home -- which are predicted by Robinson based on his analysis of research on adult subjects. It would seem these data, in part, support Meyersohn's proposition that motivations which encourage heavy television viewing also work to bring about an increase in other leisure pastimes.

For these adolescent respondents, however, there do appear to be some "at-home" activities which compete with television viewing. The playing

of home video games (which may be in competition not only for viewing time but also viewing equipment), sleeping and playing musical instruments stand as trade-off activities with television viewing. As involvement with television increases, these activities are seen to decline.

The negative relationship demonstrated between television viewing and all of the group membership variables reinforce Robinson's observations: group memberships involve away-from-home activities and they are competitive with television viewing. It is this finding which appears to have most serious implications for those interested in television's impact on young viewers. Respondents who view greater amounts of television are less likely to take advantage of the social learning opportunities provided by group membership, and choose instead to displace this social time with a passive, non-interactive activity. While there is not strong evidence here to suggest that heavy television viewers are more introverted or more reclusive than those who view less television, it does appear that some opportunity costs of heavy viewing come at the expense of forfeited chances for group interaction. Although viewing itself may often take place in a social context, the demand for these social interactions is not at the level expected in conventional group exchanges. Moreover, lessons of compromise, problem solving, leadership, followership, persuasion, communication and others which follow naturally from group participation, and may serve in adult life, become part of the opportunity costs of heavy television viewing.

In consideration of television effects, the impact of content may be only half the issue. It is not only what television presents on the screen, but what opportunities it prevents in the form of alternative activities that may well have profound effects on the viewer.

Footnotes

[1] Based on annual statistics provided by the A.C. Nielsen Company. Most recent figures demonstrating this trend reported in the "Nielsen Report on Television -- 1983," by the A.C. Nielsen Company, New York, New York, 1983.

[2] A.C. Nielsen discusses advancements in audio-visual technology that cater to personalized lifestyles and thereby further target audience members. Growth of such technology and widespread adoption by the public will likely bring about additional total use of the media (this pattern is already seen for video cassette recorders). Nielsen's discussion of the new technologies can be found in "Nielsen Newscast," No. 1 (1980) and No. 2 (1982), published by the Media Research Group of A.C. Nielsen Company.

[3] John P. Robinson, "Television and Leisure Time: A New Scenario," Journal of Communication, 31(1): 120-130 (Winter 1981) (hereafter referred to as "Leisure").

[4] The dominance of television viewing is discussed in detail by George Comstock, Steven Chaffee, Natan Katzman, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Roberts, Television and Human Behavior (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

[5] Jack Lyle and Heidi R. Hoffman, "Children's Use of Television and Other Media," in Television and Social Behavior, ed. Eli A. Rubinstein, George A. Comstock and John P. Murray (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), pp. 129-256 (hereafter referred to as Behavior).

[6] Rolf Meyersohn, "Television and the Rest of Leisure," Public Opinion Quarterly, 32:102-112 (1968).

[7] B.H. Long and E.H. Henderson, "Use of Time: Some Personal and Social Correlates," Elementary School Journal, 73:193-199 (1973).

[8] George Comstock, et al., op. cit., pp. 141-168.

[9] John P. Robinson, "Television's Impact on Everyday Life: Some Cross-national Evidence," in Behavior, ed. Eli A. Rubinstein, et al. pp.410-431.

[10] Cunningham and Walsh, Videotown 1948-1958 (New York: Cunningham and Walsh, 1959).

[11] John P. Robinson, "Leisure", p. 120.

[12] Elliott A. Medrich, "Constant Television: A Backgroung to Daily Life," Journal of Communication, 29(3):171-176 (1979).

[13] Data obtained in a telephone conversation with a representative from the A.C. Nielsen Company. Nielsen statistics are reported for age groups 6-11 years and 12-17 years. Estimates for the 11-13 year-old group were obtained by averaging the two Nielsen categores.

Table I

Pearson Correlation Statistics Between Total Television Viewing Time and Participation in Alternative Liesure Time Activities[1]

	r	p
Media Activities		
Radio Listening	.03	.43
Tapes/Records Listening	.14	.02
Newspaper Reading	-.07	.48
Social Activities		
Video Games -- Home[2]	-.13	.10
Video Games -- Arcade	.17	.01
Musical Group Membership[3]	-.24	.01
School Group Membership	-.23	.001
Church Group Membership	-.17	.01
Other Activities		
Play Musical Instruments	-.21	.003
Sleeping	-.12	.05
Engage in Hobbies	.04	.42

[1]Statistics for all respondents except where indicated otherwise
[2]Only of respondents who have a home video game (n=
[3]Only of respondents who play musical instruments (n=47)

Table II

Away-from-home and At-home Activities Which Compete with and Complement Television Viewing[1]

	Away-from-home Activities	At-home Activities
Competitive with television	School clubs Church groups Music Groups	Sleeping Home video games Playing musical instruments
In-between		Newspapers Radio Hobbies
Complementary with television	Arcade video games	Records/tapes

[1]Scheme used by John P. Robinson, "Television and Leisure Time: A New Scenario," Journal of Communication, 31(1): 120-130 (Winter 1981)